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Anupriya P B

Freelance Research

Kasaragod, Kerala, India

anupriyapb0@gmail.com

Tracing Semblance: A Comparative Study of Rabindranath Tagore's *Chandalika* and the Story
of the Samaritan Woman in the Bible.

Abstract

Rabindranath Tagore is the most influential Indian writer, who played a key role in introducing to the west, the Indian culture. The Bible is the most widely read and studied book in the history of literature. This paper attempts to analyse the play *Chandalika* by Rabindranath Tagore and the story of The Samaritan woman in The Bible and thus trace how the woman protagonists in both the works resemble each other.

Chandalika, the two act dance drama by the most celebrated Indian writer Rabindranath Tagore delineates the exploration of self identity by a Chandal girl named Prakriti. The play pictures how this untouchable and low caste girl goes through a transformation within her due to the interference and influence of a Buddhist monk, Ananda. The play discusses the social instincts inherent within the society regarding caste, class and gender. The mother of prakriti is presented as a constant reminder, of them being untouchables, to Prakriti. The mother finds it difficult to accept and acknowledge the awakening of the sense of identity within her daughter. Prakriti represents the margin and

Ananda helps to bring her to center. Here Ananda who is the cause of prakriti's enlightening is depicted as a spiritual guru. Through this, Tagore emphasises the idea that spirituality has the power to heed inner conflicts and complexes of mind.

Prakriti goes to fetch water from the well, where she meets Ananda, the disciple of Buddha. It is noon time and the sun is at the peak. It makes us surprised why she washes the calf at such blazon hot. Her inferiority of low birth might have forced her to fetch water from a public place at such an extreme time, so that she may not come across any 'other' people on the way. The incident is narrated by Prakriti to her mother. She says that "Then a Buddhist monk came and stood before me, in his yellow robes, and said, 'Give me water'. My heart leaped with wonder. I started up trembling and bowed before his feet, without touching them. His form was radiant as with the light of dawn. I said, 'I am a chandalini, and the well-water is unclean'" (Tagore, *Chandalika*; act 1). It is evident from this extract how deeply rooted was the taboo of caste within Prakriti's mind, who in turn is a representation of all Chandalikas.

The monk helps Prakriti to attain self identity by transforming her fractured self, which is denied legitimacy due to her caste and class. We witness her movement from the darkness of social degradation towards the light of signifying her own self as a woman. Tagore gives importance to woman characters in his plays. In this play the protagonist comes out of the chains of both caste and gender discrimination. She becomes enlightened when she recognises the essence of her being. She becomes liberated and is not ready to confine any longer to societal ideologies. She says, "Everyone united to make me conform to a creed that blinds and gags. But since that day something forbids me to conform any longer" (Tagore, *Chandalika*; act 1).

The fact that Tagore provides his audience alternatives of female representation is a matter of discussion.

His female protagonists are subversive as they defy the accepted norms of the then society and instead present women confident in their choices of life that they themselves make. Thus Tagore used the dancing body-always open to interpretation and suggestion-as a site of political resistance as it inscribes new meanings by constantly participating in and subverting the norms of culture. Tagore's 1936 essay *Nari* (Woman) urged women to step out of the precincts of their home to pursue education and cultivate their intellect stressing the importance of their autonomous self development.⁴ Tagore chose the icons of marginality – warrior, untouchable, courtesan —as protagonists in his women centered dance dramas “whose performing bodies could potentially disrupt conservative notions about female gender, sexuality and social position. (Chaudhuri)

‘Water’ is the powerful symbol used in the play. It denotes regeneration. The Bhikshu has thirst for water, through the quenching of which Prakriti satisfies her own thirst for self respect. The monk in return for her water blesses her with “inexhaustible water”(Tagore, *Chandalika*; act 1), which leads her to a new life. Water is also a cleansing agent. Here water cleans her from all humiliations and degradations and rejuvenate her, making her a new being. She is so excited when she says to her mother, “Only once did he cup his hands, to take the water from mine. Such a little water, yet that water grew to a fathomless, boundless sea. In it flowed all the seven seas in one, and my caste was drowned, and my birth washed clean”(Tagore, *Chandalika*; act 1).

The play *Chandalika* is based on a Buddhist legend and this play has influenced

various other writers. The poem 'Chandalabhikshugi' by the great Malayalam poet Kumaranasan is an example. Apart from such works, reading of the story of the Samaritan woman in The Bible makes one inquisitive of its influence on Tagore. This paper attempts to trace how Tagore's Chandaliika can be compared to the Samaritan woman, thus tracking semblance between the two.

The Bible is written between 1200 AD and 100AD. It is divided into Old Testament and New Testament. In the New Testament, the four Gospels and the Acts are historical accounts. The woman of Samaria appears in the fourth chapter of Gospel of John, which dates back to AD 95. It is necessary to know about the social and historical background of Israel, Judea and the neighboring areas during that time, in order to get a clear cut understanding of the scenario. Since the subject here is a 'Samaritan' and a 'woman' the background should be understood from the perspective of gender and Creed.

The position of woman was not much different from that of Indian society before certain decades. Patriarchy was the norm of Judaic culture. Women were forced to confine within the house and family. The traditions and laws that prevailed also contributed much to the favor of male hegemony. The concept that women are impure was prevalent. Women were not allowed to get educated under any masters and they were even denied the right to walk freely in the society. During those days, there existed strong rivalry between the Jews and Samaritans. The conflict is believed to have been initiated in 935 BC, after the death of King Solomon, due to partition of Israel. This hatred became stronger over the period of time. There existed religious and political disparities and disputes between both the nations, which also grew over the time. The Jews considered the water of Samaria more impure than the

blood of swine. So it was obviously odd that Jesus, who was born as a Jew, asking water to a Samaritan woman.

According to the Gospel of John, on his way back to Galilee, Jesus rests by the well of Jacob at Samaria. Like in Chandalika, the time is noon. A Samaritan woman comes there to draw water. To her Jesus asks, “Give me a drink”(The Gospel According to John 4:7). She might have come there at that particular time, alone, so as to avoid meeting people. The woman says to Jesus, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask a drink of me, a woman of Samaria?” (4:9). Unlike Prakriti, The woman here is not so meek or frightened in asking back to Jesus. But she is also an outcast and looked down upon by society. It is evident from her actions and conversations that she is ostracized and marked as licentious. “...For you have had five husbands and the one you have now is not your husband” (4:18).

Like the monk in Chandalika, Jesus here says to the woman about living water that he can give. “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life” (4:13-14). The Samaritan woman then develops in her a thirst for this ‘inexhaustible water’. Water becomes the symbol of a new birth here too. The conversation with Jesus helps her to redeem her life. An article about the Samaritan woman says so:

For John, the Samaritan woman represents the consummate “outsider” who, after her transformative encounter with Jesus, becomes not only an “insider” but also a leader, publicly proclaiming Jesus the Messiah to both men and women via village communication channels. Along the way the narrative deliberately highlights and then

discounts stereotypical female behaviors to which she does not conform. Yet her non-conformity presents no obstacle to her acceptance and subsequent leadership in Jesus' kinship network. (Schenk)

Jesus strongly and seriously acts against the old and worn out customs that exists in the society. There is no wonder that his disciples were astonished when they saw him speaking with a woman. During that period, talking to a woman in public was against social etiquette. It could cause disgrace for a Jew if he does so. But Jesus breaks all such rules. He chooses the Samaritan woman to unfold his identity so clearly. He also chooses this woman as an agent to spread his good news among the Samaritans. This is a new step that a woman goes out into the society and speaks, when she is not expected to do so. Thus the Samaritan woman is liberated and she regains her dignity and value.

Though the Samaritan woman and *Chandalika* belong to entirely different backgrounds, both convey the theme of transfiguration. The symbols and motives associated with this transformation are almost same. In both the case it is a woman who undergoes change in self, thus upholding the essence of femininity. Along with that, both the stories offer sharp attack on the age old customs and blind practices that are inherent in the society. Ananda and Jesus play almost similar role of quenching the 'thirst' of their subjects, though they initiate the interaction by their quest for water. For these reasons we can say that the woman of Samaria and Prakriti in *Chandalika* resemble each other to a certain extent.

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